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James M. Davidson

BORN MAY 22, 1828; DIED SEPTEMBER 29, 1894.

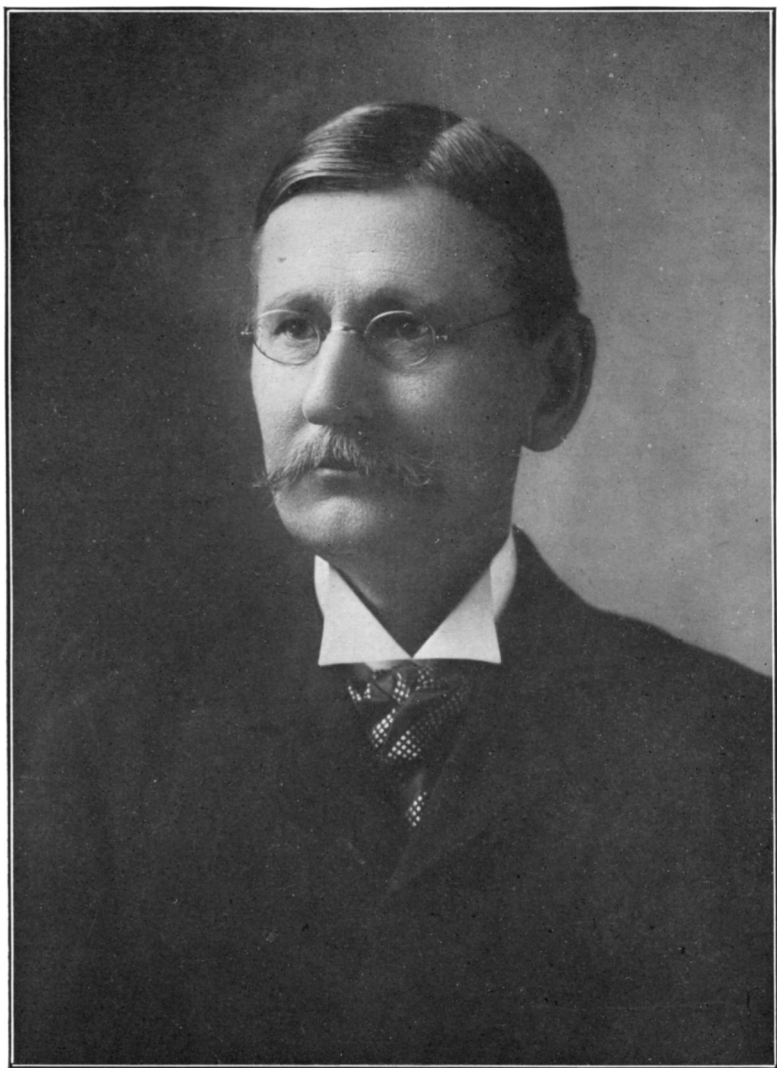
By E. A. Snively.

FOREWORD.

The Hon. Ethan Allen Snively, who has prepared this memoir of my father, the late James Monroe Davidson, came into business relations with Mr. Davidson as an employe in his office in Havana in 1860, and there and later in Carthage, was like a son and big brother in our home. His chivalry and cheery companionship, his loyal and efficient assistance to my father, through those trying years, has given him a place in the affections of Dr. Davidson's family that time cannot dim.

Mr. Snively is perhaps the only man now living who knew the newspaper men and methods of this part of the middle west fifty years ago; he is certainly the one man living who knew my father intimately through the earlier struggles of his journalistic career, and who kept sufficiently in touch with him through his later years, to speak knowingly of his life as a rounded whole.

J. M. DEMPSTER DAVIDSON,
Macomb, Ill., June 25, 1916.



E. A. SNIVELY.

James M. Davidson

The time intervening between 1850 and 1870 was the most important period in newspaper history in the State of Illinois. It was also the most progressive, and made its influence felt throughout the nation in a manner that has not waned in the last four decades. Between these two dates the whig party, as a political organization, went out of existence and, under the controlling influence of Illinois newspapers, the Republican party was born and nourished in this State and they gave to America a president who vies with Washington in the love and veneration of the people.

The Northern portion of the State was largely settled by men from New England; the Southern portion by men from the South, while the Central portion was the abode of a cosmopolitan population made up principally from both sections. Early in the history of the State the newspaper had taken a leading part in the realm of politics and the editorial columns were the reflex of the best thought, and were taken as a guide by the people. In fact, especially in the Southern portion of the State, the editorial columns of the papers were controlled, and the editorials often written, by senators, congressmen and judges. It was to the editorial department the reader turned, and as he perused the columns he knew the words were from a great leader. It is conceded by all historians that the press, though small in numbers, was the controlling influence that made Illinois a free State in the great contest of 1823.

It was not until the early fifties the country editor began developing more independence and political self-will than had characterized his earlier predecessors; true he did not forget that when the tea cup struck the bottom of the empty flour barrel, he might be compelled to call on the local politician for

financial aid, and thus there was, in many instances, a second mortgage placed upon his columns. The period mentioned brought to the front many of the greatest so-called "country editors" who have ever been known in Illinois—men firm in their unwavering belief and unyielding in their advocacy of the principles which controlled them. The slavery question was the all-absorbing theme and on its opposite sides the editors rallied in no uncertain manner. Paul Selby, Smith D. Atkins, Ben F. Shaw, W. H. Hainline, Benjamin R. Hampton, John Moses and many others were constant "in season and out" in advocating anti-slavery sentiments. It was Mr. Paul Selby who had the foresight to call the editors named and others together to organize a party which should take unqualified grounds in opposition to slavery, and from this meeting there was organized the Republican party which has been in control of the State, with two exceptions, since 1856. It was at this period that John M. Palmer, though a Democrat, but strongly opposed to slavery, felt called upon to establish, at Carlinville, a paper which he called the "Free Democrat" but which soon was classed in the ranks of the Republican press of the State. On the Democratic side standing like a stone wall, behind Senator Douglas and paying him the greatest homage ever a constituency paid to its senator, was a number of editors prominent among whom were Charles H. Lanphier, John W. Merritt, Austin Brooks, J. M. Davidson, A. H. Swain, J. B. Danforth, J. M. Bush, C. H. Whittaker, W. T. Davidson, J. R. Bailey, H. L. Clay and others. Among those named none was more prominent than the subject of this sketch.

James Monroe Davidson was born in Madison county, Illinois, May 22, 1828. In 1835 the family removed to Petersburg, Menard county and three years later removed to Lewistown, Fulton county. Mr. Davidson was raised in an atmosphere of politics; his father had served as sergeant at arms in the Illinois senate and was for years a deputy sheriff of the county and held numerous other positions. Schools were poor and it is doubtful if he was different from the average boy and looked upon the school room as a place of punishment. The

printing business, however, appealed to him, and in 1843, he entered the Fulton Banner office, in what in those days was a most important relation, and was called the "devil." In 1846 the paper was moved from Lewistown to Canton and Mr. Davidson, though only eighteen years of age, in company with Charles McDowell, established the Fulton Gazette, which they published for one year, when Mr. Davidson retired.

Mr. Davidson had a great taste for music and after leaving the Fulton Gazette he went to St. Louis to attend a musical convention given by Prof. William B. Bradbury, who at that time was one of the leading musicians of the United States and who was the composer of many gospel hymns. Professor Bradbury was attracted to young Davidson and urged him to become a teacher of music. This proposition appealed to him and for several years he traveled over parts of Illinois and gave music lessons in various cities; in later life he would frequently refer to this period, and it was a great satisfaction to him to recall that among his pupils had been Mrs. Abraham Lincoln and her son Robert. He had learned from Prof. Bradbury the Pestalozzian system of teaching music and was one of the first to introduce in Illinois the modern system of notation, superceding the old-fashioned "buckwheat notes." He was so successful as a teacher of music that his friends hoped that would be his life work. But the lure of the newspaper field was too great and in 1855 he established the Fulton Democrat at Lewistown. Naturally, an unusually bright and most vigorous writer, a close student of politics, his editorials at once attracted attention from other newspapers and the Democrat soon possessed a phenomenal influence outside the limits of Illinois. Senator Douglas had no greater friend with the Democratic press of the State and was often quoted outside of Illinois. Senator Douglas had no greater friend than Mr. Davidson; while the Senator drew around him thousands of most ardent and devoted friends who had never seen him, Mr. Davidson had in addition an intimate personal acquaintance running back to his boyhood days, when the senator was frequently a guest at his home. After the elec-

tion, in 1858 he sold the Democrat to his brother William. During the legislative session of 1859 he represented the St. Louis Republic (then called the Republican). Soon after the close of the session he purchased the Mason County Herald, at Havana, and changed the name of the paper to the "Squatter Sovereign." The name of the paper at once attracted the attention of the public and the papers throughout the country; this, coupled with the vigorous, and at times vitrolitic editorials, soon made the "Squatter" a most welcome visitor in thousands of homes and at the editorial tables of many newspapers. The "Squatter" was the first weekly in Illinois to indulge in cartoons for the purpose, as the editor said, "to show up by cuts what he could not cut up by thrusts." His cartoons were made by himself, his engravers' tools consisting of a pen knife and he generally used the underside of a patent medicine "cut."

The nomination of Mr. Lincoln for president seemed to Mr. Davidson absolutely ridiculous. The idea of defeating men like Seward and Chase with the Sangamon county lawyer was, to his mind, giving up the fight in advance. He compared Lincoln with Douglas and after the Democratic party divided he could see no possible chance for the defeat of the man at whose feet he worshipped. At Petersburg and later at Lewistown and Havana, he had met Mr. Lincoln and heard him in the trial of cases in the court of the county seats of those counties. Earlier in his life in "traveling the circuit." Mr. Lincoln had, no doubt, much better success than in his later years. After Mr. Davidson grew to manhood, Mr. Lincoln, when he came to Lewistown, was, in the trial of cases, brought into contact with such lawyers as Kellogg, Purple, Weed, Goudy, Ross, and men of that character; these men, several of whom afterwards became judges and congressmen, had warm personal friends, some of whom would always be on the jury and too often the issues were lost sight of by their personal preferences for "home talent." At no time, during the campaign of 1860 could he treat Mr. Lincoln's candidacy seriously. He felt, like many others, that Mr. Lincoln was placed on the tick-

et to be beaten and that in the next four years Seward or a man like him would be nominated in the hope he could be elected. The campaign of 1860 was a most strenuous one for Mr. Davidson. His paper was filled with able editorials while as stated above, it was the only weekly in the State which was illuminated with cartoons; and in that day, as sometimes now, the cartoon was the most forceful argument. Political defeats were new to him, and the fact that his political ideal was defeated by the Springfield lawyer was like the loss of a dear friend.

During the winter following the election of 1860 he took strong ground in opposition to secession and also mercilessly lashed those who advocated letting the South go. When Southern States began to secede he followed the course of Douglas as he had for years. His editorials were master strokes of patriotism and were widely copied. Many things go to show that he was in confidential correspondence with the senator, so closely did he interpret the course pursued by Douglas.

The morning the news came that Fort Sumpter had been fired upon he issued an extra giving all the news available. He called a meeting for that night at the court house. After the organization of the meeting Mr. Davidson was called upon to address the audience; he answered he was no speaker but if his friend Jack Mallory would come forward he would favor them with a song. The two gentlemen then sang the Red, White and Blue and for an encore the Star Spangled Banner. After twelve minutes of applause had expired, Mr. Davidson called attention to the fact they had met for the more serious business of forming a company of volunteers to defend the union. A committee was appointed to organize the company and the meeting adjourned.

The shot that was fired on Fort Sumpter killed forever the principle of "Squatter Sovereignty," and Mr. Davidson changed the name of the paper to the "Havana Post." The change in the name made no difference in the editorial course of the paper. With Douglas he believed there could be but

two parties: Patriots and Traitors. With the former he included every one who was willing to stand by the president; with the latter he included those, who as partisans of the president were continually finding fault and in this way embarrassing the executive. In Mason county, as in other counties of Illinois, there were some Democrats who were strongly opposed to what Douglas stood for in those dark days; and these men had no friendly feeling for the Post or its editor. The loss of patronage was not inconsiderable, but the greater loss was the consciousness that he had lost the influence and respect of men who had once been his friends—and he had lost it because he was standing by his country in the hour of its greatest peril and that on the success of men whom he had opposed rested the perpetuity of the union. The summer of 1861 was no doubt the unhappiest one he had ever spent. The writer of this was at that time a young apprentice in his office and a member of his household and can speak from personal knowledge of the heart aches caused by the fear, indulged in by many at the North, that the Union would be dissolved and the South succeed in establishing a confederacy based on slavery as its corner stone. A few years before, while the steamboat *Ocean Spray* was burning, Mr. Davidson jumped into the Mississippi river in an attempt to swim to the shore when a large log struck him in the breast and nearly killed him; this rendered him incapable of military service, but he did valiant service to the Union cause by the use of his newspaper, and did much to aid in raising the 17th and 85th regiments. While articles from his paper were widely copied both in the metropolitan and other papers, he knew that many people with whom he had fought, shoulder to shoulder, in political battles had become estranged and knowing that he was merely following the path the then dead Douglas had marked out, he accepted an offer made by John B. Wright and disposed of the Post, believing that in other fields he could accomplish more for his country.

In June, 1861, Wilbur F. Storey, of Detroit, Michigan, became proprietor of the *Chicago Times*. Mr. Storey was han-

dicapped from the start by not knowing the Democrats of the State; he felt some knowledge of them and their various interest was necessary to make the Times the dominant and controlling factor in Illinois Democracy. Influential and prominent Democrats learning that Dr. Davidson had sold the Post and knowing him well and having great confidence in him were instrumental in having Mr. Storey offer him a confidential editorial position which he accepted. He could not prevail on Mr. Storey to accept his views as to the duty of the Democratic party and the Times drifted farther and farther until he felt compelled to resign his position.

In September, 1863, he purchased the Carthage Republican, a Democratic paper which he successfully conducted until his death. For two years the paper had been under the control of Maj. R. W. McClaghery. Prior to Maj. McClaghery assuming control of the paper it had been a rather radical anti-war publication and indulged in elaborate and unfriendly criticism of administration and its policy. Maj. McClaghery had just graduated from college and while he was a Democrat, he was what was popularly called a "war Democrat." This did not suit a number of the radical Democrats and when the Major sold the paper he entered the army. Upon assuming charge of the Republican, Mr. Davidson soon learned he had no easy task before him; there were the same dissensions in his party he had encountered in Mason county and in addition to this the county had not fully recovered from the Mormon war. There were a number of people who, while not holding to the Mormon faith and not sympathizing with their religious belief, yet felt the Mormons had not been fairly treated; others saw in the decadence of the city of Nauvoo, the failure of what they believed would be a great city composed of thousands of happy and industrious people. Carefully considering the whole question Mr. Davidson decided that as the "Mormon war" was over, it need no longer be a matter for editorial discussion. As to politics he would stand loyally by the National administration, but would be unsparing in his war on the Republican party as a party organiza-

tion. By carrying out this policy he won the plaudits of the people and soon brought under his influence the great majority of his partisan friends.

After his return from the army Major McClaughery became the nominee of the Republican party for county clerk. The campaign was a most bitter one and Mr. Davidson did all he could to defeat the Major, but was unsuccessful. Upon his removal to Carthage to take charge of his office the Major was made Superintendent of the Presbyterian Sunday School. The children of Mr. Davidson were attendants at the school as there was then no Episcopal church in the town. Learning of Mr. Davidson's ability as a musician he asked him to come to the school and take charge of the music; the request was acceded to and for a number of years Mr. Davidson had charge of the music in the school but he retired when his own church was established in Carthage.

He entered journalism in the day when personal journalism flourished. Intense in all things, and being the master of invective, sarcasm, wit, pathos and a student of history and politics, he was no mean adversary as was found out by many a candidate of the opposite party and many an editor who did not know what an adversary he was. Later in life, however, he took a leading part in placing the country paper on a higher plane, making it an educational institution and keeping it free from anything which could not be read in the home and by the most modest woman. It became his pride that his paper was recognized by press and people as an able, clean, honest journal in which they could have unbounded confidence. The reader might not agree with him but their differences would be treated in the most gentlemanly manner and to all there was extended the right of opinion.

When he went to Carthage the city was possessed of a number of saloons. He recognized the fact that the proprietors were paying for the privilege of selling liquor, and that the responsibility of their continuance rested upon the people. He at once adopted the policy of educating the people to the fact that they did not have to license the saloon with all the

harm following in its wake, for money to conduct the city government. His method was a little slow to suit some of the so-called "reformers," but it won in the end and for many years Carthage has not had a licensed saloon and they were voted out by the people and there was none of the bitterness that so often follows the ejection of the saloon.

Learning that the Lutheran church organization was contemplating the establishment of a college, he did, as he had done at Havana when Fort Sumpter was fired upon, called a meeting of the citizens and laid the matter before them with his plan of securing the college for Carthage. His plan was followed and today Carthage College, one of the finest religious institutions is pointed to with pride by the people of the town.

As an evidence of his character and how he was esteemed when he was yet a boy, it is related that the County Treasurer of Fulton County desired to send to Springfield a large sum of money to pay the taxes due the State. He selected Mr. Davidson to make the trip. There were no railroads; the way was through a rough country, but the lad started and for two days plod along over the rough country roads. Arriving at Springfield late at night he found the State Treasurer and paid over the money; when asked why he did not wait until morning he replied his instructions were to pay over the money as soon as he reached Springfield and get a receipt. His action was an index to his whole life; whatever he had to do was done correctly and promptly.

He answered the Governor's call to take part in the "Mormon war" but before the scene of conflict was reached by his company, the "war" was over. However, he went on to Nauvoo and remained there several days and wrote accounts of the trouble and descriptions of the city.

As a printer he was an artist. His newspapers were always the finest specimens of the typographic art and his job printing received many encomiums from the few typographical magazines then published. He was one of the first, if not the first, to establish a system of country correspondence and

in this, as in other things, he was a pioneer whose path was gladly followed by newspaper men over the State.

Mr. Davidson was a leader among that fast disappearing class who were the makers of history and have done so much to place Illinois in the front rank of States. Firm in his convictions, especially during the war, when he was threatened by those who differed with him, in his courage and adherence to what he believed to be right, and as a forceful advocate of his lofty ideals, he has left his impress upon the history of the State and his life is an inspiration to the young men and women of today. To cement the contending factions of his party, to eliminate forever the saloons from the city he had made his home, to lead in the establishment of a great college, to raise a splendid family who are each a credit to him and the community and the State are achievements which place his name high on the rolls of the very best and most progressive citizenship. A most kindly man to those in his employ, a model husband and father, the world was made richer by his life, and his death created a void which it will be hard to fill.

On the 28th day of November, 1853, Mr. Davidson was united in marriage to Miss Susan Candace Springer. The wedding took place in the city of Springfield, and was celebrated by Rev. Mr. McGee, the Methodist minister, whose wife was a relative of Mr. Davidson. To this union there were born twelve children five boys and seven girls. Two of the boys are now ministers of the Episcopal church; one is postmaster at Carthage, one is a very prominent business man of Springfield. The other son died after having made a great reputation for himself as a journalist. One daughter is a musician of ability and one is conducting the paper of which Mr. Davidson's widow is proprietor.

If ever a man was blessed in his marriage, it was Mr. Davidson. Naturally very brilliant, well educated, with a clear insight into life and all its various ramifications, Mrs. Davidson has been the ideal wife and mother.